



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Amarcord by Federico Fellini

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form by taking its logic absolutely seriously. Hitchcock does not "deconstruct" the fundamental forms of "classical cinema": he acknowledges the meanings his films have accorded them.

Again: what we need is a serious history of cinematic forms, grounded in critical analyses of the significant uses to which these forms were put.

Dayan proposes in place of such a concrete history an *a priori* demonstration that certain forms of cinema are destined by their nature to serve *bourgeois* ideology, and thus do not stand in need of serious critical acknowledgment.

—WILLIAM ROTHMAN

Reviews

AMARCORD

Director: Federico Fellini. Script: Fellini and Tonino Guerra. Photography: Giuseppe Rotunno. Music: Nino Rota. New World Pictures.

Fellini has spoiled us. For over twenty years now, he has regaled us with a series of increasingly fanciful films, explosions of color and decor that were stamped with his own extroverted personality. In film after film, Fellini seduced us with his frescoes of carnival decadence, his sensuous world of jaded aristocrats, circus clowns, and grotesques.

Some people, though, didn't want to be invited to the Fellini party; the nay-sayers regarded Fellini's exuberant fantasies as self-indulgent betrayals of his neorealist roots. As if in answer to his most outspoken critics, Fellini has now offered us a modest humanist comedy for which he's received almost unanimous acclaim. The critical response to *Amarcord* has been that Fellini has finally put aside the excesses of his baroque mannerist phase in order to return to his original sources. Many critics have responded with almost a sense of relief, as if Fellini has purified his art by reuniting his work with his "noblest" impulses.

I disagree. *Amarcord* may be the director's warmest, most subdued film (who goes to Fellini for warmth and good nature?), but it is also his safest. I miss the grand flourishes, the master showmanship, the epic heightening, that I've come to expect from Fellini. *Amarcord* lacks the vigor and drive, the joyous high spirits and sense of release that have been for me the chief

pleasures of Fellini's work. Though it's true that Fellini has begun to repeat effects, and even to parody himself, his recent films were all charged by a sense of experimentation and a love of film form that was infectious. *Amarcord* simply doesn't have the *brio* and the flair of the best Fellini.

Critics who regard the film as a return to the humanist realist tradition are mistaken: *Amarcord* is a trimming away, a paring down, rather than a return to the style of his earliest films. Though Fellini's first efforts were nurtured by the postwar neorealist films of DeSica and Rossellini, Fellini has always shown impatience with strict realism. Rather than objectively recording the surfaces of Italian life, he always worked from personal predilections that hardened into obsessions. In his own richly imaginative way, he combined the two strains that have always dominated Italian movies: the epic tradition, with its fondness for spectacle and operatic gesture, and the humanist tradition with its deep feeling for the outcast and the oppressed.

Since *Juliet of the Spirits* in 1965, Fellini has emphasized spectacle at the expense of characterization. Largely bypassing the concern for individual character that marked *La Strada* and *Nights of Cabiria* and the literary and philosophical speculations that enriched *La Dolce Vita* and *8½*, Fellini went on to entertain his audience with a procession of extravagant, mostly erotic, fantasies. (*Fellini Satyricon*, a cornucopia of florid hothouse images, is the masterwork of this late phase.)

AMARCORD



In these recent mannerist films, in which more than ever the director held us by the sheer force of his personality, Fellini has earned the right to include his name in the title. A magician, a ringmaster, the most high-spirited of MCs, Fellini transformed ancient and modern Rome to fit the dimensions of his own vivid fantasies. *Fellini's Roma* was unlike the Rome any tourist has ever seen: in a series of apocalyptic images, Fellini offered a great mad painter's Last Judgment rendition of the Eternal City. *Roma* represented the purest example of the director's interest in playfully reinterpreting reality: a real city was reflected through the prism of a fevered imagination.

Amarcord, like all of Fellini's work, far from being a "return" or a "departure," is a blend of the real and the fanciful—it's a distinctly stylized version of Italian life. This time, though, Fellini has avoided a circus atmosphere; the film isn't the collection of breathtaking tableaux that is, for me, the essential Fellini. He has deliberately simplified his canvas, but he hasn't substituted anything in place of the intoxications of his previous work. *Amarcord* is a muted reminiscence of life in a seaside town of forty

years ago, and the memoir is almost entirely free of character insights or absorbing incidents. Visually, structurally, thematically, it's the director's most unencumbered work.

Fellini doesn't impose himself on the material to the degree he has in his most recent films, but he hasn't found anyone else to guide us through the film's fragmented panorama. The point of view is shifting, confused. This chronicle of a year in the life of a provincial town needs a strong unifying presence—from whose perspective are we seeing the events? There's a narrator who has much the same function as the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, but Fellini's treatment of him is absent-minded; he forgets about him for such long periods that when he re-enters he seems intrusive. The adolescent boy who is the logical choice for the hero (and who also serves from time to time as half-hearted narrator) is dimly presented; he merely laughs and looks pleasant.

Fellini keeps us away from all his characters. His main family, who are the anchor and focus for the anecdotes, are simply stage Italians, comic opera buffoons who conform to facile preconceptions about what Italians are like:

they're hot-tempered, warm-hearted, they gesture extravagantly. We're encouraged to laugh at their squabbles, and then, when the mother dies unexpectedly, we're to be moved by their vulnerability. The pathos is unearned.

The townspeople consist of the usual Fellini *dramatis personae*, only the types this time are less vivid and exact. As an object of lust for adolescents, the fat tobacconist here is no match for La Saraghina in *8½*. The town nymphomaniac is much less vital a presence than her counterpart in *Satyricon*. Only Gradisca, the town's most womanly woman, emerges full-bodied from among the tapestry-like figures; Magali Noel's lush performance transcends caricature.

As a treatment of adolescence, the film is ordinary. Sexual initiation is mined for conventional comedy. As a chronicle of a town, the film is surprisingly flavorless. The town never really comes alive, is never felt as a dramatic presence the way Rome is in *Fellini's Roma*. As a human comedy, the film is also attenuated. Though Fellini includes a death, ends with a marriage, and details the passage of the seasons, most of the anecdotes are too wispy to support the mythic framework.

Of course there are images that only a master could manage: a great ocean liner, its myriad blinking lights outlined against a pitch-black sky, passes in the night; a peacock elegantly spreads its tail in gently falling snow. But even on the big set-pieces, Fellini works with muted authority and to diminished effect. The film opens with a bonfire which the townspeople build as an homage to spring: the event is edited in a staccato, disjointed style, and the scene is rushed, curiously played down: where is the fanfare, the sense of occasion? The town boasts a magnificent white hotel, but Fellini hasn't known how best to use it: the stories he tells in it and the characters he fills it with are strained and lackluster.

Compare the finale here (Gradisca's marriage) to the procession of the characters in *8½*. The ending of *Amarcord* is strangely off-hand; the camera pans the remnants of the mar-

riage feast, randomly picking out pockets of scattered activity. The composition is deliberately unstructured, nonpictorial, but it's also unimpressive—there's nothing to hold on to. The finale completely lacks the sense of communion or the joyous resolution or the formal beauty which have marked every one of the director's previous endings. Easy, likable, filled with flashes of charm, *Amarcord* is Fellini's thinnest performance.

—FOSTER HIRSCH

PART-TIME WORK OF A DOMESTIC SLAVE

Director: Alexander Kluge. Script: Hans Drawe and H.D. Muller. Photography: Thomas Mauch. Kairos Film.

Part-Time Work of a Domestic Slave, the third feature of West German director Alexander Kluge, revolves around six months in the life of one Rosewitha Bronski—at 29, wife, mother, abortionist, and growing political activist. Rosewitha is a part-time personality; partly in the home, functioning as wife and mother; partly in the factory, organizing workers; partly working as an abortionist. (Like *Mother Courage*, the Brecht protagonist who feeds off the Thirty Years War to keep her family and finances intact, Rosewitha absurdly performs abortions to afford more children of her own.) Rosewitha's life is anarchic—in bits and pieces of half-shaped ideas and unresolved actions against the disorder and injustices surrounding her: doctors who don't pay fees, factories plotting relocation, husband and children screaming for attention.

Kluge likewise disjoins his narrative with basic Brechtian alienating devices, interjecting voice-over and filmic inserts as comments on Rosewitha's domestic and political activities. Her story is told in Epic/episodic fashion, with the film divided into two major segments: the first focusing on her family life and abortion practice, while the second half follows Rosewitha outside the home and into political organizing. The parts are bridged by discussions and debates between Rosewitha and a female comrade about "what to do politically."